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Records of the Cordwainers' Society of Tewkesbury, 1362-1941

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Records of the Cordwainers' Society of Tewkesbury, 1562-1941

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THE records of the Cordwainers' Society of Tewkesbury cover a period of nearly 400 years, beginning in 1562 and ending in 1941. They show the gradual evolution of the society from a craft guild into a social and charitable club, and then a political club as the embodiment of the local Conservative party.¹ In 1562, thirteen years before the incorporation of the borough of Tewkesbury,² the society appears to have been in existence for some time, but no earlier record of it has been found. In 1941, at the dissolution of the society, the surviving members resolved that their muniments should be deposited with the borough archives, and this resolution took effect ten years later when the borough archives were moved from the Town Hall to the municipal offices.³

The Records

The principal business of the society is recorded in a series of seven paper books. Six of these books, though varying in size, are in nearly uniform bindings of brown leather, with gilt titles on the front. The rebinding was done apparently in the mid-19th century, perhaps the result of a resolution of 1839 that the archives were to be examined with a view to formulating new rules. The titles on the front indicate that the books are:

- Rules and Regulations, 1602
- Transactions, 1562-1655, vol. i
- Accounts, 1599-1625, vol. i
- Accounts, 1677-1733, vol. ii
- Transactions, 1718-1826, vol. iii
- Proceedings, 1829-97
- Transactions, 1898-[1941], vol. v

The volume of Proceedings, 1829-97, is the one book that is not bound

¹ The sources for this article are, for the most part, the records described below. Quotations from the records are given with the spelling modernized. The records are not individually cited in the footnotes, which indicate information taken from other sources. The author is grateful to Mr K. E. S. Smale, Town Clerk of Tewkesbury, for making the cordwainers' records available to him.

² J. Bennett, *History of Tewkesbury* (1830), p. 378.

³ Ex inf. Mr Irvine Gray, County Records Officer.

in brown leather; the volume of Transactions, 1898-[1941] was evidently bound to match the first five books. The distinction between 'Transactions' and 'Accounts' is not really a valid one, as the 'Transactions' include accounts and the 'Accounts' include items other than accounts. Some of the terminal dates do not correspond with those of the contents. The numbers given to the volumes are muddled; it is not clear whether by accident or—on the assumption that some books were missing—by intent. The first five books are numbered 1-5 on their spines, in the order given above; if this enumeration is contemporary with the binding, as seems likely, any missing volumes were missing when the books were rebound, but it is as likely that apparent gaps are the result not of losses but of a disorderly method in keeping the record. The first book, 'Rules and Regulations, 1602', is compiled from more than one set of rules, and while none is clearly of 1602, one set derives from the reign of Elizabeth and another from 1618. The same book contains an agreement of 1733.

The muniments also include a charter of 1698 granted by the borough corporation to regulate the conduct of the society, a bundle of admissions to membership, 1719-61, two volumes of accounts, 1827-1903, a volume of accounts of subscriptions, 1855-84, two bank pass-books, 1876-1941, a bundle of bills for dinners, 1758-1853, and a bundle of 20th-century correspondence and papers. These records are kept in an 18th-century oak chest, similar in size and shape to the traditional school tuck-box, marked W. Hatheway, Master, 1746. With them were at one time a leather apron (of which more later) and a painted banner,¹ which were not in the box in 1964.

Organization of the Cordwainers

The society was variously known as the society, guild, fraternity, or fellowship of cordwainers, or of cordwainers and shoemakers. It was one of about a dozen craft guilds in Tewkesbury. After the tailors' guild, mentioned in 1487, it was the earliest recorded there, and it survived much the longest; the tailors' guild, the last to go except for the cordwainers', became a sort of tontine when the three remaining members decided to admit no more members, and about 1812 the last survivor realized nearly £600 by the sale of the guild's property.² The purpose of a guild was to regulate the branch of trade

¹ List in Glos. Records Office; the banner is said to be marked 'for Mr Cork's Committee', but perhaps 'Cork' should be 'York': John Reginald Yorke was Conservative candidate for the borough, unopposed, in the by-election of 1864, and one of the two successful candidates in the election of 1865: W. R. Williams, *Parliamentary History of Gloucestershire*, p. 257.

² P.R.O., D.L. 29/638/10362 rot. 2d for the tailors' guild in 1487; and see Bennett, *History of Tewkesbury*, pp. 199-200.

practised by its members, by maintaining standards, restricting admission to the trade, and preventing unfair competition. In an age when the masters were also craftsmen, it combined the functions of trade-union and employers' association, and it was exclusive, restrictive, and interfering. After its establishment in 1575 Tewkesbury corporation, which was charged with regulating trade in the town, used the guilds as the instrument of its control and as a buttress for civic pomp and pageantry. The guild also had a strong social purpose, and throughout the records of the cordwainers' company conviviality is the most frequently recurring theme.

Etymologically, a cordwainer was one who worked in Cordovan leather (or Spanish leather in general), which was suitable for shoes of the better sort. In London and in Scotland the distinction between cordwainers and other shoemakers survived into the 17th century and later,¹ but it is unlikely that in Tewkesbury the name cordwainer was ever other than an alternative (perhaps a slightly euphemistic one, like 'meat-purveyor' for 'butcher') for shoemaker. The cordwainers' guild in Tewkesbury was the guild for all shoemakers trading on their own account; the other leather-workers' guild there, in existence by 1579, was of whittawers, glovers, point-makers, pursers, and pouch-makers.²

The first recorded act of the cordwainers, in 1562, was their agreement to certain orders, and the first of the orders fixed the wages of journeyman shoemakers employed by members of the company:

'Imprimis it is ordered, agreed, and fully condescended as well by the said masters as by the whole assent and consent of the fellowship of the said occupation that every journeyman of the said occupation shall have for the making of every pair of shoes that is to say for every dozen of men's shoes and women's being double-soled 21*d*, for every dozen of children's shoes double-soled 16*d*, for men's shoes single-soled 14*d* for the dozen, women's shoes single-soled 12*d*, for children's pumps 9*d*, soles sewing and lasting 8*d*, and that they shall have for boots double-soled 4*d*, and for every pair lined shoes 2*d*, and making so of preste [?] boots 5*d*. And further it is agreed to give pay to no journeyman above the price of a penny for his making of a pair of pumps both for men and women'.

Several later wage-scales are recorded. An undated one, in which the rates for double-soled shoes and pumps had risen to 2*s* and 18*d* respectively, appears to be the earliest after 1562. It also introduces rates for 'cork ware' (not more than 4*d* a pair) and 'turnovers' (not more than 3*d* a pair). In 1617 a new scale raised the rate for ordinary shoes to a

¹ Cf. *New English Dictionary*.

² Tewkesbury Borough Records, vol. i. Whittawers whitened skins; point-makers made short straps for fastening.

maximum of 2s 6d a dozen and for high-heeled shoes to 3s. The rate for 'turnovers' was raised to 4s a dozen pairs, the same as for 'Polony shoes'. 'Polony boots', at 10d a pair, brought the journeyman shoemaker 2d more than plain boots. Employers giving or promising higher rates were to be fined 3s 4d for each offence. The last recorded wage-scale, of 1650, priced the journeyman's work for boots and shoes according to the type of heel, distinguishing between wooden heels, broad bottom 'or peg heels as we call them', and French false heels, and also between 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary long' (or high) heels.¹

The orders of 1562 provided also that no cordwainer should employ another's journeyman without agreement, that members who failed to come to the meetings should be fined, and that the outgoing masters of the guild (until 1578 there were two joint masters elected to serve for a year) should render a proper account to their successors. Further orders of 1567 were that no member might train anyone to the craft except as an apprentice bound for seven years, that apprenticeships were to be recorded in the company's book, that strangers might not practise shoemaking in Tewkesbury until they had compounded with the society, and that the fee for admission to the society was to be not less than 40s. Another order of about the same date describes the meetings, which by immemorial custom all members were obliged to attend on pain of a fine, as monthly drinkings. In 1578 it was ordered that each member should have only one shop, should employ no one outside that shop, and should employ no one who had not served seven years as an apprentice. Thus the society set out to protect the vested interests of its members, to enable itself to keep an eye on the members' business activities, and to give the members as a group a social as well as a commercial identity.

The early 17th-century rules of the society carried this policy further, for example by making the journeyman shoemakers of the town liable to summons by the master and wardens of the company and by giving those officers the right to examine the affairs of any shoemaker. At the same time, the rules show the control over the company exercised by the corporation, whose authority underlay the two rules just cited. Half of all the fines and penalties collected by the society, and a rent of 6s 8d formerly paid by the society to the Crown, were to be paid to the corporation; no one could become a member of the society until he had become a freeman of the borough (a status that could be acquired by inheritance, completed apprenticeship, or composition), and no one who was not a freeman and a member of the

¹ There is a comparable scale of 1647 in 'Accounts, 1599-1625'.

society might practice the shoemaker's craft in the town; anyone 'discommoned' by the corporation for his 'rude and evil behaviour' was to be suspended from membership and from shoemaking until restored by the corporation; and any disputes or difficulties within the society were to be referred to the corporation.

At this period the society had a membership varying in numbers between ten and twenty. The only officers recorded before 1578 were the two masters. In that year the two masters were replaced by a single master assisted by two wardens, one chosen by the master and one by the members at large. There was also by then a beadle, who was responsible for giving notice of meetings and collecting fines; when officiating he was to carry a white wand, and because he was chosen from the junior members and had to spend a good deal of time on his office he was allowed to collect for himself 1*d* from each member at the election of the new master and was excused from paying his 'quarterage'—or contribution to the eating and drinking fund. Each office was held for a year. The master acted as treasurer. Office was not always welcome, and the rules stipulated fines for members who refused to serve. Women were not excluded from the society, because a widow often carried on her husband's business after his death. This was necessary partly because a widow could not be expected to dispose of the business immediately and could not carry it on without belonging to the society, and partly because apprentices needed to complete their seven years.¹ Thus one of the thirteen members in 1599 and two of the thirteen in 1620 were women, and the Elizabethan rules mention not only brethren of the society but also 'sisters (being widows of the said craft)'. It is not clear whether the women members were liable to serve office. If they were, it looks as though they served through deputies.

The society in transition

There is nothing very much to record of the society's affairs during the greater part of the 17th century. Although the number of apprentices declined, membership of the society showed no falling off; there were twelve members in 1630, twelve in 1650, eighteen in 1670. By 1673, perhaps by 1653, one of the members was appointed clerk of the society, presumably making the master's office more formal and honorific. By 1599 the obligatory meetings appear to have become quarterly instead of monthly, and the members continued four times a

¹ On a master's death an apprentice sometimes transferred to another master for the completion of his term; more often he served out the term with the master's widow.

year to 'keep their hall'. It should not be inferred from this expression that the society had its own premises: the hall was kept sometimes perhaps in private houses but usually in an inn—at the 'Ram' 1631-6, at the 'Hart' 1637-41, at the 'Plough' 1644-6, at the 'Swan' 1647-51, and at the 'Pelican' 1653. The predominance of drink and drinkings in the records is probably an unfair reflection of the society's interests and activities, but it is true that as the 17th century passes the accounts show fewer charitable gifts from the society's funds.

In 1698 the corporation gave a charter providing new regulations for the society. The charter referred to the existence of a fellowship of cordwainers and shoemakers in Tewkesbury time out of mind, to the charter which the king had given to the borough earlier in 1698 authorizing the corporation to regulate trade, and to controversy among the cordwainers; it went on to recite in detail the rules of what was to be known as the Company of Cordwainers and Shoemakers of Tewkesbury, naming the master and ten existing members, and while the rules were more meticulous and precise than earlier ones they contained little that was substantially new. One important provision was that if the number of members fell below six, 'foreigners' were to be admitted without paying an entry fine. Another provision was that the society should acquire a streamer or banner with the 'arms or cognizance of the borough'¹ for use on civic occasions.

The charter of 1698 is the last evidence of the corporation's attempting to regulate trade through the cordwainers' society. It is likely that the society had already lost sight of its original purpose. No proper record was kept of its business in the period 1685-98 (a period, incidentally, when the status of the corporation itself was ambiguous),² but the quarterly meetings continued to be held, usually at the 'Black Dog'. That the society was becoming primarily a social and convivial club is suggested by the increase in membership—twenty-eight in 1701, twenty-six in 1710—at a time when the trade of the town in general was not expanding notably, and without any corresponding increase in the number of apprentices.

Membership declined after 1710, but by the thirties there were several members who were certainly not shoemakers. In 1734 the master was Edward Popham, Esq., and Viscount Gage was a member; in 1737 Lord Gage was master with Popham serving as his deputy. In 1740 there were thirty members, including a lord, three esquires, and

¹ The borough in fact became armigerous only in 1964. The society's accounts for 1698 include an item for the purchase of a streamer.

² The borough was governed under James II's charter of 1686, the validity of which was rendered doubtful by the Royal Proclamation of 1688.

several local landowners. This represented a great change in the nature of the society. Though in earlier times shoemaking had been one of the main industries of the town, as the numbers of the society show, the members had been prominent neither in social position nor in wealth. They are not known to have occupied the larger houses,¹ or to have issued trade tokens,² or to have been active in the affairs of the corporation.³ First, therefore, about the end of the 17th century, the craft guild became a social club; later, the club began to attract people of comparatively high social rank. Quarterly meetings continued, but the main function of the club was the annual dinner, held in the forties at the larger inns of the town—the ‘Crown’, the ‘Swan’, the ‘Wheatsheaf’, and the ‘Bell’—and in 1751 and 1752 at the Town Hall. Women ceased to figure among the members, and the food provided—mutton and walnuts in the early years of the century—had become more sumptuous, including pigs, geese, and apple-pie.

In 1755 the society suddenly reverted, for unknown reasons, to an earlier form. With the exception of Sir William Strachan, whose name continued to head the list of members until 1760 although he did not pay his quarterage, all the gentry dropped out. Membership fell to eleven by 1760. In 1755 and 1756 the annual feast was held at the master’s house, and thereafter at relatively humble taverns. That there was an attempt to revive the society as a craft guild is suggested by a resolution of 1762 to prosecute George Turbeville of Tewkesbury, a mercer, for carrying on business as a cordwainer without having served his apprenticeship, and by the fact that women were again admitted: the annual feast of 1764 was at the widow Stephen’s house. For a decade after 1764 the accounts and business of the society were recorded very scappily. Membership continued to decline and was down to five in 1784 and 1786.

In 1787 somebody evidently made an effort to revive the society, and at one meeting twelve new members were admitted. Few if any of them were shoemakers, there were no more widow-members, and soon the membership again began to include gentry. Members of Parliament for the borough were present, apparently as guests, at the feasts of 1791, 1793, 1794, and later. This marked the beginning of the political interests of the society, but there was not yet any party affiliation. To some extent the society remained a shoemakers’ guild, for apprentices’ indentures continued to be entered in the society’s

¹ Hearth Tax Assessment, 1672 (P.R.O., E179/247/14; photocopy in Glos. Records Office).

² Ex inf. Mr Gray. An unusually high proportion of Tewkesbury tradesmen issued tokens in the later 17th century.

³ Tewkesbury Records, vol. iii.

books until 1792, and the admission of those who were free by inheritance until 1807. At the same time the charitable activities of the society were revived; for in 1792 it was resolved that at each quarterly meeting every member should give 1s for the needy and sick. These donations were not very gladly given, and were allowed to fall in amount, for in 1826 it was resolved that they should be increased from 6d to 1s. In the same year a new office was created with the appointment of a treasurer. It is not possible to say whether there was any connection between that appointment and the absence of any records in the books for the years 1827 and 1828.

The Society as a Conservative Club

At first sight it is tempting to link the gap in the records with other circumstances and to imagine that it coincides with the society's becoming a right-wing political club. The contemporary agitation for parliamentary reform provided a possible reason; the appointment as secretary and treasurer in 1829 of Henry Brydges, who, having first occurred as a member in 1822, retained those offices until his death in 1876, and the beginning of a new book of 'Proceedings' give the appearance that the society was entering a new phase. If the change in the society started so early, it was a gradual one. Until 1833 both the Members of Parliament for the borough, one of whom was a Whig and later sat as a Liberal,¹ attended the annual dinner as guests. From 1834, however, there are signs of a change. Guests apparently came no more to the dinner. The number of members, thirteen in 1834 (having remained fairly constant since 1787), rose to thirty-two in 1841, and in 1842 was limited at that number.² In 1838 a member was expelled and in 1839 another resigned, but both events may have resulted less from political sympathies than from offensive behaviour, suggested by the resolution of 1841 that at the annual meeting no wine should be taken with dinner except as the secretary might see fit.

Other possible indications of the changed nature of the society were the emphasis on its character as a fraternity, the members being addressed as 'brother' from 1846 until the society's dissolution in 1941, and the decision in 1839 to examine the archives and codify the rules. From this period the society's books seldom give more than a formal (and often facetious) record of its non-serious activities. Until 1873 there was no overt reference to its political character, but in that year the selection of candidates for the municipal election was recorded.

¹ Williams, *Parliamentary History of Gloucestershire*, pp. 255-6.

² The number may have recalled the date of the Reform Act.

Thereafter the negotiations preceding municipal, county council, and parliamentary elections appeared from time to time in the minutes, as did reports of political speeches. Special meetings, for political purposes, were referred to but not minuted. For the most part the records give little indication of the political character of the society, but that character emerges in isolated details, such as the resignation of a member, at the end of the First World War, on the ground that he took no active interest in politics. The annual meetings remained convivial dinners at various inns of the town: from 1872 the 'Swan' became the regular place for this meeting until it was temporarily closed in 1909, and from then until 1913 it was replaced by the 'Bell'. The quarterly meetings were held at inns until 1872 when it was ordered that because of the 'pecuniary state of the company' no more should be summoned. In fact they continued to be held in some form until at least 1884, but apparently without the authority of the society.

Two related features of the society in its period as a political club deserve mention: the humorous recollection of the cordwainers' trade and the traditional frivolity of the annual meeting. In the cold light of historical research each appears rather heavy-handed and school-boyish, but clearly the vestigial shoemakers enjoyed themselves. In 1832 it was ordered that leather aprons—a sign of the cordwainer's calling—were to be provided at the annual meeting, and in 1847 fines were fixed for appearing without an apron. In 1860 it was ordered that the regulation about aprons was to be observed, and in 1869 a quarterly meeting decided that the annual meeting should be held each year on St Crispin's day.¹ Less frivolous was the decision, also in 1869, to offer prizes for work by cordwainers' apprentices, and next year prizes to the value of £3 10s were given for the best pairs of Balmoral boots, Wellington boots, and Blücher boots. With one exception, this was the last recorded charitable act of the society; the next year the giving of prizes (intended as an annual event) was postponed, and the year after the 'pecuniary state of the company' precluded prize-giving. The minutes for 1876 refer to an initiation ceremony for new members, and in 1880 an 'initiating surgeon' was appointed. From the minutes of 1902 (when a member was fined for not wearing his apron) and 1921, it is clear that the surgeon operated with an awl.

From 1883 the annual meetings were enlivened by recitations and songs as well as speeches; some of the songs became part of the ritual, and the meeting of 1900 was brought to a close by singing 'the old

¹ 25 Oct.; St Crispin is the shoemakers' patron.

song'. Another traditional event was the election of the beadle, who was always referred to as the 'biddle', a humorously pejorative archaism. The other ancient offices, those of the master and wardens, had been held from 1836 by all the members in rotation, though the order was sometimes adjusted to enable a distinguished member to be elected master. The beadle was also elected annually; but he was the clown of the gathering, and one man (the best buffoon) would fill the office year after year. By the seventies the members had come to expect a violent contest for the office, with funny speeches by, for, and against the candidates, and an election carefully managed so that the old beadle just scraped home. In 1920 G. Haines, who had been beadle since 1900, declined to stand again for the office; the honorary secretary had been discharging the duties but confessed:

'that he could not carry out (or perhaps he should say carry) the obligations imposed by our late Bro. Boweth [*recte* H. Browett, a member up to 1887], that the Biddle should receive and drink one quart of strong beer to be supplied by each brother summoned, to say nothing about the osculatory process also imposed, of imprinting a fraternal kiss on the cheek of every pretty maid who opened the door of the brother's house to the Biddle'.

Though his office had become a mockery, the beadle still performed his 16th-century function of summoning the members to meetings. The quart of beer presumably represented the *id* a head that the beadle was empowered to collect in 1578.

The End of the Society

The outbreak of war in 1914 put a stop to the annual dinner for five years; committee meetings continued but were not minuted. In February 1920 an annual dinner was held at the 'Hop Pole', and another in February 1921. By tradition the annual dinner was held in October or November, and it looked as though the society was getting back to its old ways when it held its annual dinner at the 'Hop Pole' in November 1921. That, however, was to be the last of such meetings. It was resolved there that no new members should be elected, and a standing consultative committee was appointed, presumably to direct the society's political activities. The formal record of the society's proceedings came to an end, except for the minute of the final meeting at which the society was dissolved.

On 30 Dec. 1941 four surviving members (apparently the only surviving members) met at the house of George R. Barlow, who had been elected in 1889 and was the senior member. The others were

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Charles A. Roberts (1904), Sidney Baker (1911), and William Tysoe (1911). Barlow reported that the society had a credit at the bank of £30 12s 8d, and that since the death of Alderman Alfred Baker there had been no honorary secretary or treasurer. He said that the legitimate functions of the guild had ceased, and that membership had become so low, with no prospect of increasing, that the guild should be dissolved. It was unanimously agreed that the Guild of Cordwainers be dissolved, its funds given to the Tewkesbury Hospital, and its muniments deposited with the borough archives. After this minute there is inserted in the book the hospital's receipt for the money, signed by Roberts as secretary and treasurer of the hospital. With this last charitable act ended the Society of Cordwainers of Tewkesbury, after four centuries of varied history.